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1954

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Abie's Irish Rose"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 19, 1954

'Abie' Keeps Touch Through 30 Years

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

For 30 years it has been fashionable among theater people to raise their eyebrows and talk contemptuously about Anne Nichols' "Abie's Irish Rose."

Now that Miss Nichols has brought her comedy back to Broadway, opening it at the Holliday last night, it might be well for some of the arch jokers to take another look at it.

The famous old show is clearly no work of art. It never tried to be, unless a work of art is something that wrings an occasional honest tear and tickles you into many straightforward laughs.

It would be silly and ignorant to pretend to judge "Abie" as if it was a new play. The surprise about it now is to find how timeless a play it is, for all its faults.

In case you belong to the generation which is not acquainted with "Abie" and his girl and their parents, this is a comedy about a Jewish boy who marries a Catholic girl.

The construction of the play is better than its over-all writing. After a slowish first act, the second boils up some first-class suspense, as you wait for the Catholic father of Rosie to walk in on the Jewish wedding Abie's father has planned.

When he does, there is outright war. For the first time, the youngsters' well-meant lies about each other's religion are shown up to the gullible Papas.

Miss Nichols has assembled a most pleasing cast for her play. She directed it with the sort of casual familiarity that suits its easy mood.

The outstanding performance is given by Anna Appel, as a friend of Abie's father. She is an ample woman whose effects for drawing a howl of laughter or choking your throat up are all simple and swift and honest. I am not at all sure that she is not my favorite actress.

Ludwig Donath is the intense Jewish father, bossy, loving and intense, and Nell Fitzgerald is his Irish counterpart, hot-tempered and decisive.

"ABIE'S IRISH ROSE"

Revival of the play by Anne Nichols; staged by Miss Nichols; settings, lighting and costumes by Paul Morrison; presented by Michael Ross at the Holiday Theatre, November 18, 1954. The cast:

Mrs. Cohen.....Anna Appel
Mr. Cohen.....Lou Gilbert
Dr. Samuels.....Roger de Koven
Solomon Levy....Ludwig Donath
Abie Levy.....Val Dufour
Rosemary Murphy..Judith Paige
Patrick Murphy..Nell Fitzgerald
Father Whalen.....
Douglas Rutherford
Dr. Jones, D.D....Woody Parker
Bridesmaids.....Jean Lamont, Marianne Marshall, Maggi McDonnell, Virginia McMahon
Matron of Honor...Marion Myser

As the young lovers, who manage to get married in every available church, Val Dufour and Judith Paige are agreeable to watch and warm in their behavior. Lou Gilbert plays Miss Appel's good-humored husband, and the two men of the cloth are portrayed by Roger de Koven and Douglas Rutherford.

New York Post

November 19, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Return of 'Abie's Irish Rose'

Up to the last minute I couldn't bring myself to believe it would actually happen, but last night they revived "Abie's Irish Rose" at the Holiday Theater. It may have been a mistake. Over the course of the years since it was first unveiled before an unsuspecting public in 1922 to become one of the most famous successes in the history of the American stage, Anne Nichols' private version of a racial "Romeo and Juliet" has become something of a legend. And it isn't always advisable to inspect legends too carefully. I fear this is true in the case of "Abie."

Of course, this isn't "Abie's Irish Rose" in its pristine form. Miss Nichols has "modernized" it here and there. It currently takes place after the more recent, rather than the earlier, of the world wars. The Irish father now arrives by plane. One of the characters says, "you're a doll," and another says "you've gone chicken on me." They talk about the USO and there is a reference to Einstein. It has also become a bit sedate, as perhaps befits its years, and its farcical mood has calmed down considerably. My further impression is that the author's incidental lectures on the need for racial amity have been extended and emphasized.

The Plot

For the benefit of any Martians in my audience, I should perhaps report that "Abie's Irish Rose" is about a Jewish boy named Abie Levy and an Irish girl named Rosemary Murphy, who fall in love and marry despite the bitter opposition of their bigoted but basically lovable fathers. A priest and a rabbi are present to uphold the gentle wisdom of religious tolerance, and, since Miss Nichols is missing no theological bets, she brings in a Baptist minister to join the forces of goodness. But it takes twin grandchildren to bring the two warring old men together.

It wouldn't be going too far to say that the humor tends toward the primitive. When Rosemary Murphy is introduced to her Jewish father-in-law, the sly son tells his parent that her name is Rosie Murphisky. When Rosemary asks her friend, Mrs. Cohen, to look after the ham she is baking, the worthy lady makes comic grimaces. The Irish father grows increasingly indignant when he finds orange decorations in Mr. Levy's home. It's this school of comedy that is represented.

Good Will

There is no doubt that Miss Nichols has written what she means as a play of good will, and it would be nice to applaud her today and say that the famous old comedy is better than its critical reputation has made it. But the melancholy truth is that "Abie's Irish Rose" is a persistently dull and ramshackle antic. It hasn't even the touch of farcical humor that once enlivened it at least a trifle, despite all its defects. In calming down something that never was very gay, she has, I think, deprived her work of the few traces of minor fun it once possessed.

It is a little curious to find two actors who were being serious in "The Dybbuk" a couple of weeks ago striving for comedy in the Nichols play. They are Ludwig Donath, as the Jewish father, and Lou Gilbert, as his more tolerant friend, and they are still good actors, although handicapped. Most of last night's laughter was captured by Anna Appel as a lady given to talking about her operation and making faces at the idea of baked ham. Despite a belief to the contrary, there were reviewers who liked "Abie" in 1922. I'll be surprised if any of them can find a good word for the poor thing today.

Daily Mirror

November 19, 1954

'Abie's Irish Rose' Full Of Humor, Heart, Humanity

By ROBERT COLEMAN

On May 23, 1922, Anne Nichols opened a comedy called "Able's Irish Rose" at the Fulton Theatre. There were six other premieres that evening, and "Abie" got reviewers from book and music departments—the seventh stringers. With one exception, they belted the daylights out of it.

BUT ACTRESS-author-producer Nichols believed in her brainchild to the extent of cashing in her insurance policy and slapping a mortgage on her home. She persuaded most of the cast to take temporary salary cuts, and moved the play to the Republic Theatre. There it began to catch the public's fancy.

"Abie" set a new long-run record for Broadway, with 2,327 performances over a period of five-and-a-half years. And there were as many as 12 road companies doing it at one time. It grossed millions of dollars, and delighted over 11,000,000 people.

For four years, we proudly boasted that we were probably the only New Yorker who hadn't seen "Abie's Irish Rose." Then, on the evening of its fourth anniversary, the late James Metcalf, gentleman, scholar and critic of Life and the Wall Street Journal, cornered us in the lobby of the New Amsterdam.

HE INSISTED that we accompany him to see "Abie," with the proviso that we could leave after the first act if bored. Frankly, we were not. We sat through all three acts and enjoyed them immensely. "Why?" we asked Metcalf. And he replied, "Because it has great humanity."

Well, Michael Rose brought an up-to-date version of "Abie's Irish Rose" to the Holiday Theatre Thursday evening. It is still the story of the Jewish boy who married the Irish girl, thereby angering two devoted fathers of differing faiths, with a final happy reconciliation for all. The jokes are old, but the heart beats as warmly as ever.

Most sophisticates have always held "Abie" up to ridicule, but the late George Pierce Baker often brought the students in his Harvard 47 Workshop to New York to see it, as "a perfectly constructed play." And Mary Allston, eminent Indian authority, called it "the great American folk play."

IN THE CURRENT cast are Anna Appel, Lou Gilbert, Roger de Koven, Ludwig Donath, Val Dufour, Judith Paige, Neil Fitzgerald, Douglas Rutherford and Woody Parker. In the first act, they played with a wooden effect and were inaudible even in the fourth row. But, starting with the second canto, they caught the spirit of Miss Nichols' comedy and came through beautifully.

Personally, we would suggest that Anne call in Saki Oura, the sound genius, to install a few mikes among the foots, and relax her company every evening before they undertake the initial stanza. This would be of inestimable value to her now historic creation.

All right, "Abie" is still a broad comedy, obvious in its humor, but possessed of enormous vitality. It remains a lesson in tolerance and good-will, by which all—including the ultra blase — may profit. We had a wonderfully nostalgic time at the Holiday, for you cannot dismiss lightly humor, heart and humanity. This is decent sentiment at its best and entertainment for the many.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

November 19, 1954

THEATER

'Abie's Irish Rose'

By WALTER F. KERR

Blooming Again

I DON'T know why everybody's always picked on "Abie's Irish Rose." Of course, it's terrible, but apart from that it isn't so bad.

It's full of good will, for one thing. So much good will hasn't oozed through a theater since the last time Betty Hutton retired. Here they are, the Cohens, the Levys and the Murphys, all celebrating Christmas together—with Abie Levy proudly putting the Star of Bethlehem on the top of his tree, Patrick Murphy asking for a peek at his brand-new granddaughter Rebecca, and Mrs. Cohen sailing gloriously into the living room with a beautifully baked ham.

* * *

That's the way "Abie's Irish Rose" goes. An outraged Irishman instinctively buries his head on a rabbi's shoulder at precisely the same moment that an exasperated Jew turns for comfort to the silver-haired Father Whalen. Oh, there are furious little flurries in which the words "mick" and "schlemiel" get tossed about, and Patrick Murphy is heard to accuse his daughter of "marrying an A. P. A." But no one is fooled. Love is at the bottom of "Abie's Irish Rose," the love that binds, the love that leaps all barriers, the love that does terrible things to the cockles of the heart and the soft tissue of the brain.

* * *

"Abie's Irish Rose" is very pretty, too. Starting with a walnut-paneled setting that might have been peeled off a choice calendar advertising oil-burners, it warms steadily to an ever brighter glow. As an organ peals in the offstage recesses, a father gives tender advice to a son about to be married. A bevy of bridesmaids descends the stairs, in delicate measure. A curtain is thrown back to reveal a lovely and loving Rosemary Murphy, swathed in white satin, embracing her upstanding groom. The third act opens in the half-light, where, under garlands of holly, two proud young parents stare in perpetual bliss at their babe in a bright blue bunting. Why, there's no end to the beauty that has come to us, softly, from Anne Nichols' dreams.

And the thing that is most remarkable about this relic of 1922—it is, I am sure, the thing that made it run just short of forever—is the peculiar quality of its badness. "Abie's Irish Rose" has a genuine badness, an honest badness, a badness that is all belief and no calculation. Its story may be simple-minded, its humor hoary, its characterization ten notches lower than the lowest dialect story ever told. But its author has poured simple faith into every juicy clinker of a gag; and the result has a curious, horrible authority of its own.

Because of these things the eerie revival at the Holiday would be almost worth going to see, as a kind of valid anachronism. Misfortune dogs us, though. The actors at the Holiday do not share Miss Nichols' confidence in the charade. Some of them—Lou Gilbert, particularly—are playing it with a pretty sheepish look. Some of them — Val Dufour, particularly — aren't so much playing it as flailing at it. And none of them —with the possible exception of a fairly massive comedienne named Anna Appel—have the kind of robust, devil-take-the-hindmost indifference to rationality that would send them headlong into the foolish green pastures in which the piece might survive. I think they're scared—and I guess they're right to be.

You can say one thing for "Abie's Irish Rose," though. Most bad plays are tedious, if not terrifying. This one at least lets you grin at its increasingly preposterous, heart-of-gold idiocies.

DAILY NEWS

November 19, 1954

Warning: This May Be Your Last Chance to See 'Abie's Irish Rose'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A stunning comedy by Anne Nichols, "Abie's Irish Rose," opened last evening at the Holiday Theatre. Well, it stunned me, anyhow. By the end of the second act I was helpless from not laughing. By the middle of the third act my sides ached (the south ones). And before the comedy was over I was numb.

This comedy is about a boy named Abie Levy and a girl named Rosemary Murphy who get married. One of them is Irish and the other is Jewish—I can't remember which, in my dazed condition. Anyhow, their respective fathers raise hell about the union, and while they are raising hell Miss Nichols is raising her own kind of Ned with American humor. Sample joke:

Rosemary Murphy: "He's very acute."

Solomon Levy (pleased): "You think I'm cute?"

All Ends Well

Everything comes out all right, though. With the help of a Baptist parson, a Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi, the two fathers are reconciled and begin slobbering and cooing over their twin grandchildren. Thus, in the nick of time, does Miss Nichols avert the outbreak of World War Three, between Eire and Israel.

Seems to me, now that my head is clearing a bit after a purely medicinal noggin of liquid corn flakes, that I saw a play called "Abie's Irish Rose" in 1922 and it ran until 1927. When it closed Herbert Hoover began to lose his popularity, and in two short years the entire financial structure of this country went sqush. This one was written by a Miss Anne Nichols, too—in three days, they said. She was a slow writer.

Must Be Modernized

This new play is quite a lot like the old one, but it is more modern. Abie is a veteran of World War Two and Rosemary is a veteran of USO Camp Shows. So the similarity must be a coincidence. In the new production, Ludwig Donath plays one of the fathers with unction and Neil Fitzgerald plays the other with wholesome anger. Val Dufour and Judith Paige are the Abie and Rosie, and Anna Appel is pretty funny in a character part.

Character part? What am I saying? They all are character parts.

Journal American

November 19, 1954

Long First Run Still a Mystery

Revival Fails to Click Despite Adequate Sets and Actors

By JOHN McCLAIN

INTO each life some rain must fall—the sun can't shine all the time—but it does seem a little rough to get both rain and a revival of "Abie's Irish Rose" all on the same night. But that's the fate that befell those of us who were assigned to the opening at the Holiday Theatre last evening.

It was a famous "first" for me, this latest resurrection of Michael Rose's, and with any good fortune it will also be a "last," for despite its incredible record and certain rather weary efforts to bring it up to date, it still remains one of the most disingenuous corn-balls of all time.

One approaches a theatrical phenomenon of this kind with the secret hope that some inkling of what made it run for five years, despite hideous reviews, will emerge from the evening. I gave it the schoolboy try—honest.

Tried to Laugh

I tried to forget everything I'd heard about it; I made a game effort to overlook the banalities. I kept saying to myself that this was a simple and honest hunk of Americana; I even tried to laugh it up with some of the vociferous first nighters. But it was no use—it is plainly embarrassing most of the time.

It is even impossible to imagine that it could ever have been acceptable with the most magical cast and production. Last night's effort featured a couple of adequate sets and some capable players.

Anna Appel is a good comedienne and Ludwig Donath is an actor of long experience and merit, but only in rare moments and with the most brash situations were they able to bring the festivities to life.

The same can be said to some degree of Neil Fitzgerald and Lou Gilbert, whose material was even less rewarding. As for Judith Paige and Val Dufour, the unhappy youngsters cast in the title parts, one can remark that they fought a game but losing battle.

To be deadly serious for a moment, isn't Anne Nichols' entire idea a little dated? Maybe it got by in 1922 by the sheer audacity of exploiting the defiant marriage of a Jewish boy and a Roman Catholic girl.

A long war and a lot of years later this doesn't seem to be even worth whispering about; today there are so many more important things to race your motor.

But, of course, there are always a certain number of people who will want to be able to tell their grandchildren they once saw a performance of "Abie's Irish Rose." There may even be enough to make it run for another five years—but I doubt it.

The New York Times

November 19, 1954

As in 1922, a Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AFTER thirty-two years the machinery of "Abie's Irish Rose" is still rickety. In the revival, which was put on at the Holiday Thursday evening, Anne Nichols' plot is as mechanical as it used to be, and most of the jokes are elementary.

But in the opinion of a theatregoer who saw it in 1922 and again in 1937 something is different. The world outside the theatre has changed. People of different faiths and races do have to get along together, whether they want to or not. What was a comic strip joke in 1922 is a serious problem today. Every now and then "Abie's Irish Rose" strikes a sensitive chord. For good will is in shorter supply now than it was thirty-two years ago.

•

Miss Nichols has rewritten the play in many details. She has added a Protestant minister to the rabbi and priest who presided over her original comedy; and there are other indications that her famous comedy now has a message. In Ludwig Donath, who acts the Jewish father, she has acquired an able player who has style and taste. Only a few weeks ago he was giving a majestic performance as Rabbi Azrael in "The Dybbuk" downtown. His current part has less distinction, but his acting is equally remarkable.

Anna Appel is excellent as the loquacious, motherly Mrs. Cohen. There is a good performance by Neil Fitzgerald as the hot-tempered Irish father. And Lou Gilbert, also fresh from the downtown "Dybbuk," plays the part of the affable Mr. Cohen.

•

"Abie's Irish Rose" is still a naive, sentimental comedy with a preposterous plot, a wedding procession, a Christmas tree and a number of other staples out of the theatre's stock-room. But it is impossible not to notice that some of its characters have decent instincts that seem more valuable now than they did in 1922. To Miss Nichols, "Abie" has become a cause. She is right in believing that it has something to say now that it did not say originally. When her plot is not cluttering up the landscape, she manages to make intolerance look not merely silly, but reckless and evil. Amid all the jocoseness, "Abie's Irish Rose" has an occasional implication that was not apparent in the irresponsible time of Warren Gamaliel Harding.

"The Living Room"

Daily Mirror

November 18, 1954

'The Living Room' Opens At the Henry Miller

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Graham Greene's "The Living Room," we understand, has been a big hit in London. But we doubt that the American replica, installed by Gilbert Miller and Donald Albery in Henry Miller's Theatre Wednesday evening, will be that over here. It is an earnest play that probably reads better than it acts.

• • •

"THE LIVING ROOM" has to do with a young girl, in love with an aging married man, who comes to live with fear-ridden, elderly relatives after her mother dies. The aunts and uncle, staunch Catholics all, suspect that the niece is having an affair with the lecturer on psychology who also happens to be the executor of her mother's will.

One bitter aunt schemes to break up the romance. Another is too doddering to know what is going on most of the time. The uncle, an invalid priest confined to a wheel chair, is torn between mercy and the tenets of his faith regarding the sanctity of marriage.

An unhappy environment—the living room is calculated to frighten the daylights out of even a Boris Karloff—a meeting with her lover's distraught wife and the realization that she could never entirely possess him cause the girl to commit suicide.

THERE ARE materials here for a thoughtful, provocative and highly moving drama. Yet they seem merely depressing and stained-glassy, as unfolded at Henry Miller's. The philosophy—the conflict between materialistic psychology and religion—is, in our opinion, muddled and gives off a somewhat empty though pretentious ring.

This may be due, in part, to Hugh Hunt's direction. He has taken a cast of excellent players, and put them through pedestrian paces that take much of the life out of the characters. Barbara Bel Geddes, Walter Fitzgerald, Ann Shoemaker and Carol Goodner make the most of their opportunities, with occasionally touching and dramatic effect.

Michael Goodliffe is forced to be a rather stuffy, unattractive lover. It was difficult for us to understand how the Misses Bel Geddes and Goodner could have wanted to commit suicide over him. As for Nora Nicholson, apparently a first-rate trouper, she has to wrestle with the part of a senile woman who is almost comically wacky.

RAYMOND SOVEY has designed a setting that is about as drab as any scenic artist could envision. Evidently the script called for it.

There were moments in the early passages when we thought "The Living Room" was going to be a suspenseful psychological thriller. And then, to our surprise, it turned out to be a morbid melodrama about people who fear death and find no pleasure in living. It is a sincere play that seeks to come to grips with some universal problems, but never really does.

We respect its aims, but regret that it doesn't achieve them to our satisfaction. We found it taxing and infrequently rewarding.

W.W. Says: No. 1 Dramatic Smash!

"THE LIVING ROOM"

Drama by Graham Greene; staged by Hugh Hunt; designed by Raymond Sovey; costumes supervised by Kathryn Miller; presented by Gilbert Miller and Donald Albery at Henry Miller's Theatre, November 17, 1954. The cast:

Mary.....Hazel Jones
Rose Pemberton.....
Barbara Bel Geddes
Michael Dennis.....
Michael Goodliffe
Teresa Browne..Nora Nicholson
Helen Browne...Ann Shoemaker
Father James Browne.....
Walter Fitzgerald
Mrs. Dennis.....Carol Goodner

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 18, 1954

'The Living Room' Furnished by Britain

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

In "The Living Room," Graham Greene has written what often sounds like a contemplative study of conscience and fear. The British import at the Henry Miller has its highly dramatic passages.

It also wallows around in devious, agonizing realms where sins are given definition. Its line of thought is finally both pompous and beyond pursuit.

The author pits a priest against a phychologist in a battle for a young girl's conscience. The former is her great-uncle, and the latter, married and 25 years older, is her lover.

Good Dialogue.

These characters are believable enough. The situation is, too, even if it promises to be talky, since the talk is good.

But the priest's two sisters take the stage. The three elderly people, for no clear reason, have shut themselves up in the old family homestead. They lock each room where anyone has died. They apparently have no friends. Their minds are as inverted with piousness as the Collyer brothers house was with junk.

So the moral problem is whether the 18-year-old girl should go off to live in adultery, or stay in this stale, horrifying atmosphere.

Childish Charm.

One of the sisters, the elder, is charming and childish. She meets the peculiar architecture of the blocked house, by pretending there is nobody in evidence, whenever she goes through the living room to the bathroom.

The other is a black-hearted hypocrite and coward who is currently conceived as a character fit to make the Reverend Davidson look like Snow White. She nearly frightens her old sister to death, and lies and cheats as a habit, in the name of sanctity.

The young girl finally sees her lover is weakly tied to his neurotic wife. She begs for hope from the priest. He tries desperately to help her, but fails so badly that she kills herself.

Casting Problem.

The true argument of "The Living Room" is elusive in this production. One reason is the casting of that excellent actress, Barbara Bel Geddes, in the leading role.

The star is inescapably a clean-cut, healthy, shrewd and highly capable, young beauty. To have her beg other people to make up her mind, to give her help and hope, or otherwise straighten her out, is simply not convincing for one moment.

Walter Fitzgerald is most impressive as the priest. Despite playing all evening in a wheel chair, he conjures up enormous energy and tortured conflict. As the lover, Michael Goodliffe can do little to improve a not very interesting role.

Too Melodramatic.

Nora Nicholson is utterly enchanting as the gentle older sister, but it seems to me that Ann Shoemaker sets off in entirely too melodramatic a key as the more troublesome member of the family.

Carol Goodner is an old hand at making sparks fly in brief roles, and she does it once again as the wife.

"The Living Room" changed directors in midtryout. That is seldom a good idea. Whatever that shift contributed or diminished, the result is more hifalutin' than contemplative, and more confusing than illuminating.

Journal-American

November 18, 1954

Problem Play Stirs Debate

Barbara Bel Geddes Great In Utterly Absorbing Drama

By JOHN McCLAIN

WE HAVE AN informal understanding, my wife and I, that we don't discuss the play we've just seen on the way home from an opening. But last night, following the premiere of "The Living Room" at Henry Miller's Theatre, the pact came apart almost before we had gotten up the aisle.

For it is that sort of play, this first one by Graham Greene. It is comprised of thousands and thousands of words, many of them put together in quite provocative pattern; it is acted up to the hilt by Barbara Bel Geddes, Walter Fitzgerald and others, and it has the immaculate mounting of Gilbert Miller. But most of all it has the ingredients that will keep an argument alive far into the night.

My purely personal reaction to the proceedings was that Mr. Greene had played an intelligent practical joke on the lot of us.

Age-Old Problem

He has posed the simple and age-old problem of what happens when a young girl falls in love with an enlightened older man who is unhappily married; but instead of merely facing up to the facts of the matter he has brought in the Catholic Church and the tenets of modern psychology.

It isn't tough enough that these two people are confronted by an insoluable situation—they've got to get out of it, or fail to get out of it, by means of Freud and the Bible.

I am frankly too confused by it all to come to any valid conclusion beyond the fact that this situation is very baffling even to Mr. Greene.

He leaves us with the knowledge that the girl was driven to the most drastic possible solution, and that neither her great-uncle, a crippled Catholic priest, nor her lover, an authority on psychology, had all the answers either. And it is hardly simplified by the fact that one of her great-aunts is a neurotic who is steered in strange directions by an enlarged fear of death.

In fact, I think there is something to be said for my wife's view that the final curtain could have been brought down at the end of the first scene in the Second Act. What goes on after that seemed to be verbose, redundant and not in many ways clarifying to a theme which the author doesn't really want to clarify in the first place.

Having thus made the point that there's practically no point to the evening, it's only fair to add that the whole thing is utterly absorbing. One is almost immediately caught by the problem and what the people say.

Miss Bel Geddes is superlative in a role that requires an enormous range of emotional goings-on; Mr. Fitzgerald, the priest, brings great compassion and skill to a part that, I thought, might have been played by a much older performer; Michael Goodliffe, Ann Shoemaker, Nora Nicholson and Carol Goodner are excellent in the contributory echelon.

You want a good argument? Go to "The Living Room".

New York Post

November 18, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Graham Greene's Horror Drama

It is not, I think, being unfair to Graham Greene to say that, in "The Living Room," he has written a religious horror play. It is in many ways a brilliant and absorbing drama, possessing a characteristically high order of intelligence, sensitivity and writing skill, but it is also overwhelmed by a curiously unhealthy air of desperation and despair. Splendidly staged and acted at Henry Miller's Theater last night, it emerged, as I felt it did in London, as a striking work bogged down in an almost loathsome atmosphere of tortured mystic terrorism.

Mr. Greene, in addition to being a novelist of merited distinction, is equally famous as an eloquent convert to Catholicism. I think this is worth pointing out, because, unless you are aware of the author's religious convictions, you might easily suspect him of having written a subtle and embittered assault on what is actually his faith. For the religion that "The Living Room" is contemplating seems to be one that leads only to despair, terror and suicide. The author does not even concede to Catholicism the spiritual comfort that non-Catholics will grant it.

Spiritual Torment

In "The Living Room," Mr. Greene is telling the pathetic and dreadful story of a Catholic girl who is driven to suicide through her spiritual torment over the affair she is carrying on with a married man. In a gloomy house, where fear of both life and death reigns, she is surrounded by an implacable aunt who will go to any extremes to achieve her piously cruel ends; by another aunt, who is well-meaning but half-mad, and an uncle, a crippled priest with the best intentions in the world but no capacity for giving comfort to those in need of it.

It is this priest, apparently the protagonist of Mr. Greene's play, who supplies the most uncomfortable scene in a singularly discomforting drama. Confined for years to his wheelchair and deprived by his injury of carrying on his priestly functions, he has cheered himself by feeling that some day he would come to the aid of some suffering soul in his time of need. And then, when his niece approaches him for one slight word to relieve her agony of spirit, he finds himself completely tongue-tied and able to give her only meaningless platitudes.

Religion and Sex

It is certainly not my contention that plays should be filled with the spirit of optimism. Obviously, the blackest of pessimism can result in some of the most magnificent of dramas. But it is less a sense of haunting tragedy that has gone into "The Living Room" than one of unhealthy spiritual horror. There is assuredly no consolation in Mr. Greene's religious faith. It is all terror, bitterness and the deepest torment of soul. The result is a play which achieves the feat of making both religion and sex seem equally ugly and unappetizing.

In the role of the tormented girl, Barbara Bel Geddes gives a moving performance which, while it lacks some of the gentle bewilderment that Dorothy Tutin brought to the part in London, is nevertheless brilliantly managed. Walter Fitzgerald is excellent as the crippled priest, and there are good performances by Ann Shoemaker as the monstrous aunt, Nora Nicholson as the gentle one, Michael Goodliffe as the married lover, and Carol Goodner as his ailing wife. There is brilliance of execution in Mr. Greene's play, but his erotic mysticism is remarkably forbidding.

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THEATER

'The Living Room'

By WALTER F. KERR

Airless Chamber

GRAHAM GREENE spares no one in "The Living Room." He is telling the cheerless, scrupulously honest story of a young Catholic girl who has become the mistress of a married man. As he twists a tight knot between the forces of religion and the demands of passion, he does it with an uncompromising candor.

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The Catholics who would wrench the bewildered girl from her lover are many things; they are fiercely pious, genuinely well-meaning, achingly impotent and very nearly without love. There are two elderly aunts, so possessed with the fear of death that they have shut off every room in their home in which some one has died. There is a priest who would like to extend a helping, and even a forgiving hand; he is, symbolically, paralyzed. The devout can only command that Rose Pemberton give up her stolen happiness; they cannot touch her heart.

The man who has awakened passion in her, and who is determined to rescue her from the dust-ridden world that threatens to close in around her, is also vulnerable. Though he imagines that he can take Rose with a perfectly clear conscience, he is bound—not only legally but by a deep and unsuspected sympathy for his invalid wife. He can give Rose furtive snatches of bliss in a tawdy apartment; but he cannot do it without damaging two women's lives.

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Mr. Greene faces his materials with a granite detachment. Having threaded his strands together, he pulls them so taut that nothing can give. In the end, nothing does give—except Rose, who is destroyed.

It would seem that the author does not intend anything so dry and despairing as this hasty outline must suggest. Again and again during the anguished action hints are dropped that God's mercy is infinite, that it may fall upon all of these forlorn figures some time after the curtain is lowered. There is no failure that may not be redeemed by an act of faith.

But the play—being a play—can only dramatize the failure. And because the action moves steadily downward into an abyss that is humanly unintelligible, it takes an act of faith to believe in it. Mr. Greene demands as much of his audience as he does of his suffering victims—and the suffering, quite unrelieved, carries over to our side of the footlights. "The Living Room," for all the distinction of its writing and the clear integrity of its intention, becomes emotionally barren.

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An excellent company acts its heart out trying to find a living pulse in what is actually an intellectual theorem. Most successful by far is Michael Goodliffe as the psychologist who is confident that he can live by the textbook. Mr. Goodliffe looks at the world with a sharp, shrewd eye, carries his head high, and speaks with a burning conviction that is wholly credible. When it is time for him to be caught up in his own web, to stand dazed and unhearing as it occurs to him that his wife may attempt suicide, the transition is perfectly managed.

The evening's most heroic effort is demanded of star Barbara Bel Geddes. As the inexperienced girl who is suddenly thrust into a moral conflict that is all but meaningless to her, Miss Bel Geddes must struggle to make a moving image out of an essentially characterless ingenue. "She wasn't complicated," remarks the sorrowing priest toward the end of the play, "she was young and simple—that's all."

And, as the part is written, that is all. Miss Bel Geddes can only wash the intelligence from her face, make wide-eyed demands on the conspirators around her, and then hopelessly beg for pity. Though she is one of our finest, loveliest, most resourceful young actresses, the color and complexity she fights for will not come. The effort is an anguished one; the rhetorical appeals ring hollow nonetheless.

Walter Fitzgerald bites off the priest's curt little epigrams with brittle style; and the weariness with which he acknowledges his failure as man and priest is finally touching. Ann Shoemaker's frail but sympathetic aunt is often charming; Nora Nicholson's tight-lipped tower of piety is faintly overdone. Raymond Sovey has designed a properly musty chamber, "in which everything is the wrong shape, and nothing fits" with grim evocative power.

But "The Living Room" is, at the last, only grim. Mr. Greene's promised shaft of light never penetrates it.